



# Wading in the water, waiting for the brook trout



Gates carries dozens of different flies with him.

PHOTOS BY PER KJELDSEN

For the Yak's last adventure in search of Michigan's symbols, he wanted to go fly-fishing for brook trout, the state fish.

But where? He didn't have a clue — and he didn't know beans about using artificial flies to catch fish.

So he called Rusty Gates, one of Michigan's most talented fly-fishermen, and on May 1, Gates took the Yak to one of his favorite hot spots for catching brookies, on the north branch of the Au Sable River near Grayling.

It was 2 p.m., and the day had warmed considerably since morning. But it was still a few degrees too chilly for Hendrickson mayflies to start hatching on the water's surface, attracting trout from their hiding places.

Gates helped the Yak pull on waders — special thigh-high boots to keep his feet dry — and the two ventured out into the cold, shallow river.

"This is one of the most traditional



This is a model of a brook trout. A real brookie is about seven inches long, on average. A 10-incher would be considered a big one.

sports," said Gates, who grew up on the Au Sable and learned to fly-fish from his late father, Calvin, when he was 11.

"It's always been passed down from father to son. But some of the guys bring their daughters up, and more and more women are getting into it."

Gates watched the river intently, waiting for the temperature to hit 50 degrees so the bugs would rise from the river like a dark shadow. Patiently casting his rod into the fast-flowing current, he seemed as much a part of the river as the

rock he was sitting on.

"It's way cool," he said of fly-fishing. "And it never ends — you can fish for 35 years and there's still something to learn."

As the trout season progresses, hundreds of different kinds of insects will hatch on the river — and Gates knows how to tie a fly to look like every one of them. Each is a little work of art made of fur, feathers and tying silk.

But it takes more than a good lure to catch a trout. You have to be an expert sneak, moving slowly to the spot where you want to cast your rod without scaring the fish.

"A lot of times, we get down on our knees," said Gates, a professional fishing guide. "You have to be patient. If you don't get anything with one fly,

try another."

But you can't catch anything if the fish aren't feeding, and they weren't the day Gates and the Yak tried to catch a brookie.

The two were disappointed, but only briefly. As Gates says, "If they were easy to catch, everyone would do it."

When Gates does catch a trout, he always releases it back into the river — not just on the 16-mile stretch of the Au Sable where trout are protected, but anywhere he catches one in Michigan.

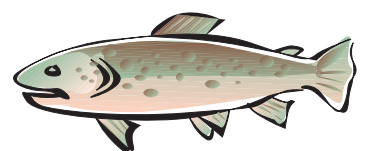
Of the state's 38,000 miles of rivers and streams, only 12,500 miles are cold enough to support trout.

"It's very easy to destroy these streams," said Gates.

Fifty years ago, there were so many



Rusty Gates, who took the Yak fishing, was named 1995 Angler of the Year by Fly Rod & Reel magazine.



**YAK FACT**

The brook trout isn't really a trout. It's a char, a member of a closely related fish family. Michigan has three true trout species. The largest, the lake trout, is a native of the Great Lakes. The other two, the rainbow and the brown trout, live in coldwater streams and rivers. Neither is a Michigan native, as is the brook trout. The Grayling trout, another native species, went extinct in the early 20th Century after its habitat was destroyed by loggers.

trout in Michigan that the limit on how many could be caught and kept in a day was 50 fish, he said. As the trout population declined, the limit was cut — to 40 fish a day, then 30, 20, 10 and finally to the current daily limit of two to five fish, depending on the stream.

Others say it's OK to eat trout. "They're great to have for breakfast once in a while," said Rich Bowman, executive director of Michigan Council of Trout Unlimited.

But the conservation group has a saying: Limit your catch, don't catch your limit.

Said Bowman: "If everyone caught what they could legally keep every time they went fishing, we'd have to drastically reduce the number of fish people were allowed to keep."

By Patricia Charget